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Washington Report
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FRANK LANTERMAN: A LEGISLATIVE GIANT

Last week former Assemblyman Frank Lanterman of Pasadena died at the age of 79. To people outside the fields of politics and mental health, Lanterman's passing was of no special significance. To those of us intimately acquainted with both the man and his accomplishments, Lanterman's death was an occasion for nostalgia, reminiscence and profound gratitude.

I served in the California State Assembly with Frank Lanterman for six years. I have never seen a man so universally respected. I have yet to see anyone in Sacramento or Washington as down-to-earth and utterly devoid of pretensions or tendencies to deception.

During his 28 years in the California State Legislature, Frank Lanterman's greatest accomplishment was the exhaustive reorganization of state policy towards the mentally ill. Emotionally disturbed people subject to abuse and contempt from just about everyone found in Frank Lanterman a tenacious and effective champion.

The landmark Lanterman-Petris-Short Act was nothing less than a Bill of Rights for the mentally ill. It was a creative expression of the utter outrage Lanterman felt when he learned that the majority of mentally ill people in state hospitals had been shoved into those institutions in violation of the Constitution and every precept of human rights. Before Lanterman's law was

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enacted, people were often committed to state hospitals after a hearing that lasted only a few minutes. Many were simply dumped into mental hospitals because greedy relatives wanted to grab their assets, because cruel relatives wanted to avoid their responsibilities or, perhaps most often, simply because the individual was troubled and also alone in the world.

In the pre-Lanterman days, mental hospital patients were confined for as long as the institution wanted to hold them. One could suffer a "life-sentence" without breaking any law, endangering any person or being given a chance to give one's own account of the situation.

Though a Republican, Frank Lanterman was progressive in outlook and non-partisan in spirit. As an Assemblyman I frequently sought his support for bills I had authored. He did not always agree with me but he always gave me a swift, honest and lucid response.

Frank Lanterman had a unique lack of interest in receiving public acclaim for his work. Unlike most politicians, he was indifferent to whose name was on the bill or whether the Governor gave him due honor when the legislation was signed. He sought legislation not personal glory.

How thankful we should be -- especially those of us in politics -- that Frank Lanterman made government his life's work. How thankful we should be that he proved a person can be an effective politician without being dishonest, duplicitous, or egomaniacal. I thank God I had the honor of knowing and working with him.

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